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## Equine economics: Pleasure or racing, horse business makes more cents

By JOHN FRIEDLEIN

Silhouetted against morning light streaming through the barn's open doorway, Patrick Preston and his thoroughbred would have made fitting subjects for a postcard from Versailles or Lexington.

Preston's farm, however, is in Hardin County. While the horse industry hasn't defined local culture the way it has in the Bluegrass region, it does play a significant role in the area's economy.

Exactly how significant is unclear. Apparently no agency tracks the economic impact horses make at the county level.

But the latest stat — gathered in the 2002 Census of Agriculture — gives an inkling. It shows 2,728 horses and ponies in the county. This is more than in any of the surrounding counties, although much less than the 12,676 in Fayette County.

Unless you work in the business, you have "no clue" of the industry's economic impact, said Jim Navolio, executive director of the Kentucky Equine Education Project.

Most of the money to be made from horses around here comes from pleasure riding. People move to the country, install a horse (or a few of them) on a 5- or 10-acre lot and then buy feed and tack.

The expense list goes on. Horse owners also must pay for vet bills and kids'



NEAL CARDIN/The News-Enterprise

Halters and bridles hang from horseshoes on a wall at the Wild Rose Farms arena off St. John Road.

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riding lessons — and a trailer and gas to haul everything to a trail.

Some of the county's horse money is made from racing. That's Preston's game.

He led the thoroughbred, Prepster, out of the barn that recent morning and hosed him off. Prepster is a good horse — no super-horse, by any means, but a good one. He overcame a leg injury to win a race last month at Ellis Park in Henderson.

Not the Derby, but good for a farm that pays \$4,000 to \$5,000 for horses. "We don't compete with people at Churchill Downs," said Preston, who runs Four Oaks Farm with his dad, Dwight. "We're the little guy."

The first thoroughbred the Prestons bought was a mare called Private Beauty, which cost \$4,500. She won a little more than \$100,000, Patrick Preston said.

"You just keep plugging away, making your expenses, just hoping to find another horse like that."

Part of this plugging away means barreling down a straight turf track hidden behind rows of corn and enlisting the family to help with chores.

"This is not a hobby at all," Preston said. "It's definitely to make a living."

Horses are more than a hobby for Karen and Tom Brown, too. The couple's Wild Rose Farm off St. John Road offers boarding, training, youth camps and riding lessons either in an indoor arena — billed as Hardin County's largest — or on trails that offer challenges like stream crossings.

It's one of several county stables that in one way or another make money from pleasure riding.

The Browns keep about 80 horses of different breeds, from paints to Arabians to thoroughbreds. They cater to the public, so they need a mix of breeds to get a variety of personalities and abilities, Karen Brown said. "You're teamed with an animal," she said. "It's almost like a dance partner."

The farm will enter 10 costumed riders on different breeds in the Heartland Festival Parade on Aug. 26. They'll show how horses have been used throughout history — from beast of burden to recreation.

(The animals haven't entirely escaped work considering Amish buggies that occasionally travel county roads.)

Another trait of modern horses is they live longer, said Ed "Mr. Ed" McWilliams. The assistant manager at Hardin County Milling in Elizabethtown specializes in the animals.

The fact they can live to age 40, and that more people want them, has created more of a demand for the support industry.

**Opinion**

McWilliams' operation sells feed and teaches nutrition and health care classes. (Not all horse owners know what they're getting into and the horses suffer).

**Editorial: Shifting  
the bill**

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Tom Gill, who runs Country Farm Supply near Hodgenville, said he has seen an increase in demand for horse products over the years.

The hot weather during the past two summers, however, has cut into business. Owners tend to choose hay over store-bought feed when it's hot and humid, plus they don't want to ride as much.

In addition to feed, he sells additives and horseshoe products.

He gets most of his business from trail riders.

Trail enthusiast and 4-H agent Bonnie Jolly said her passion is riding at Mammoth Cave National Park. Other popular destinations include Harrison-Crawford State Forest in Indiana and Otter Creek Park in Meade County.

Also, some local residents show their horses, and others test their skills in speed events such as barrel racing. The county also has a large 4-H contingent with clubs in Elizabethtown and Fort Knox, and locals join clubs such as those in Rineyville and LaRue County.

Many buy their horses at sales in Shepherdsville and, quarter horses especially, in Bowling Green.

Jolly keeps quarter horses on her Sonora property. "I'm just one of these recreational people," she said.

She describes people like herself as "are a little different in a sense" — independent and willing to do anything for a horse.

"The bond between a horse and a human — when everything is right — is pretty hard to beat," she said.

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